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REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENTS PERTAINING TO THE PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS OF INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

Information received from indigenous peoples' and non-governmental organizations

Information submitted by the "Tupay Katari" movement

COCA: AN ANDEAN CULTURAL TRADITION

I. Background

1. The coca plant is as old as man. The cultivation and consumption of its leaves, which were considered sacred by pre-Columbian civilizations goes back over 4,000 years. Of greatest significance is the fact that over time the shrub has become an integral part of Andean culture and today, as in the past, it represents the material and spiritual force underlying the identity of the indigenous peoples.

2. In the Andes no plant is more appreciated and valued by the Indians than the coca plant. The natives of the Tahuantinsuyo Empire which included Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and northern Argentina planted it just as the vine is cultivated in Europe. Historical record has shown that the coca plant, which

has been cultivated since time immemorial, has always been omnipresent in the indigenous universe and that it has not only enriched their ancestral traditions but symbolized their vigorous resistance to colonial domination and subjection.

3. Since the Spanish conquistadors identified it as one of the essential elements of the magical, religious and medicinal ritual of Andean tradition and as a factor that permitted the conquered Indians to maintain their cohesion and resistance, coca has always been persecuted and combated as a "diabolic weed". Within the ethnocentric view of the European colonizers, the mysterious leaf employed in rituals and religious offerings to the Sun and Mother Earth hindered the conversion of the indigenous peoples to Christianism. The first adversaries of the coca plant appeared and proposed its straightforward eradication under the pretext of ensuring the salvation of indigenous souls.

4. Throughout the centuries the coca leaf has been attacked and defended from all sides. It was attacked by the colonizers as part of a process of cultural alienation and by the Inquisition, behind which hid the ferocious appetites for gold, silver and all the wealth that slumbered in the depths of the Andes. Despite the inestimable contribution by the pre-Columbian civilizations to old Europe in the form of a number of valuable plants such as the potato, maize, the tomato, okra, cotton, the chilli pepper, quinoa and certain varieties of bean, paradoxically coca is singled out for discrimination. However, the aboriginal peoples identify with the coca plant - a living expression of Andean culture - and by defending it they have always defended the rights of the Andean people to preserve their millennial traditions and values.

II. Andean traditions

5. Within the aboriginal peoples' way of life, the coca leaf is not a commodity in the Andean world nor does it possess any commodity value in social relations. The fundamental role of the shrub, with its mythological connotations, is as a nexus integrating and assuring the social cohesion of indigenous families and communities (ayllus); throughout their lives it is present as a symbol of fraternity, solidarity, community spirit, mutual comprehension and reciprocal tolerance among the members of the vast empire of Tahuantinsuyo.

6. Coca has also played and continues to play a role in mediating conflicts, as a factor of reconciliation towards peace and peaceful communal work and finally as a medium for transactions and deferred payment.

7. In connection with its spiritual function, the sacred leaf of the Incas has been used for millennia by the Indians in ceremonial and ritual acts to express respect and gratitude to their gods and to Mother Earth for having provided them with the means of subsistence for life to continue.

8. In the Indian world view the coca leaf also acts as a natural nexus for the balance between nature and the people of the Andes; between labour - the barometer of their human dignity - and rational enjoyment of their natural resources. These peoples' harmonious development of a society which was the

most advanced and best organized of its time is a source of inspiration today for all those struggling for the survival of the Earth and of its vegetable and animal diversity.

9. Among the manifold social functions performed in traditional relations by coca, it inspires native hospitality and generosity. It is the Indian's companion, whether he is a miner or a labourer, from the cradle to the grave. At times of physical and moral exhaustion, despair and suffering, the small green leaves not only quell the pangs of hunger, sadness and suffering, but like a pick-me-up and a tonic they revitalize the Indians' resistance to the vicissitudes of time, to the hard labour on arid soils and the exploitation in mines, and provide them with comfort better to support their status as a vanquished people, discriminated against, exploited and affronted in their dignity.

10. Furthermore, within the Andean civilizations' millennial tradition, the coca plant has served as a spiritual and material factor, as a source of knowledge and intuition for the indigenous populations, thanks to which they were able to diagnose and cure numerous illnesses, to foretell the fate and destiny of the ayllus in the noble coca leaves and predict natural occurrences (hail, frost, etc.) in order better to prepare and adapt themselves to the rigors of the weather.

11. Consequently, it is impossible to imagine the native Andean Indians without their plant, which enshrines so much respect and veneration. By virtue of its profound mystical and mythical significance in religion, culture, health and work, the coca leaf is a powerful symbol of Indian identity and thus irreplaceable by any alternative crop. Those who try to eradicate coca are guilty of undermining the very foundations of the Andean cultural heritage, of uprooting ancestral traditions and promoting the overbearing penetration of Western so-called "civilization".

III. The virtues of coca

12. In the light of the research carried out and confirmed by daily experience, one may assert that the coca plant is essentially a medicinal plant par excellence, whose preventive and therapeutic properties have demonstrated their effectiveness throughout time.

13. According to research, the chemical composition of coca leaves is more complete and rich in calories, proteins, fats, carbohydrates, fibre, ash, minerals (calcium, phosphorous, iron, potassium, magnesium, sodium, ascorbic acid, etc.) and vitamins A, C and E than other food plants and infusions in common use such as coffee, tea, camomile, etc. Thanks to this research, it is nowadays recognized that the coca leaf contains more proteins (19.9 per cent) than meat (19.4 per cent) and far more calcium (2,191 per cent) than condensed milk, and that it is richer in vitamin B-1 (276 per cent) than fresh carrots (see, Carter and Mamani, Coca in Bolivia, 1980).

14. It is not by chance that the plant has acquired a broad and diverse range of applications in the traditional medicine of the indigenous people. Its irreplaceable qualities have been demonstrated over time and throughout a vast territory. The coca leaf has established itself as the traditional remedy for

treating physiological and psychological illness, and by virtue of its composition it is a powerful energy restorer for curing stomach and digestive ailments, alleviating affections of the larynx and vocal chords, preventing vertigo, regulating arterial pressure and the metabolism of carbohydrates, and even of improving sexual prowess.

15. Finally, a direct link has been established between man's hunger, his physical and moral fatigue and the traditional use of coca, which ranges from chewing, through infusions to poultices. Under extreme poverty, characterized by malnutrition and by disease due essentially to lack of calories and vitamins, the chemical composition of coca not only allows indigenous people to withstand cold and hunger, but also provides them with a valuable source of vitamins and energy.

16. In this respect, foreign tourists are even more aware than the Indians themselves of the value of coca as the basis of an excellent herbal tea for controlling altitude sickness (soroche) and adapting to the climate of the fascinating Andean altiplano. It is significant that during a visit to Bolivia, Pope John Paul II consented to drink coca tea and implicitly acknowledged the virtues of the sacred leaf of the Incas.

IV. Confusion between coca and drugs

17. Firstly, it is necessary to stress and distinguish the fundamental difference between chewing coca in the Andean setting and the unlawful use of cocaine in the West. In a speech made in 1992 before the annual Assembly of the World Health Organization, the President of the Republic of Bolivia, Mr. Paz Zamora referred to these confused and contradictory interpretations and observed that "coca is an Andean tradition while cocaine is a Western habit" (Tribune de Genève, 7 May 1992).

18. Undoubtedly the consumer countries deliberately assimilate the leaf with its profound significance and the reviled drug, condemned by indigenous peoples but avidly consumed by westerners in the form of cocaine, whose perverse effects are destroying the health of present and future generations in the consumer societies. In the view of the adversaries of coca, trapped by their own logic of supply and demand, coercion is sufficient to control drug addiction: i.e. eradicating the plant to the detriment of the survival of an ancestral Andean tradition.

19. Secondly, by virtue of its properties in medicine, health and work, the traditional form of coca leaf consumption is neither harmful nor injurious to the organism, unlike caffeine, tannin and nicotine which have spread and achieved universal recognition.

20. In contrast with growing alcohol and tobacco consumption, the traditional use of coca in its manifold forms is not and never has been a form of drug addiction, but a natural indigenous custom which it is possible to give up without producing any narcotic syndrome. No one can claim, in the absence of scientific proof to the contrary, that the Quechua and Aymara Indians, particularly in Peru and Bolivia, who have been chewing the sacred leaf of their ancestors since time immemorial, have become drug addicts.

21. Consequently, the indigenous coca producing populations have every reason to be indignant about the lack of logic in the contradictory arguments of the Western countries, which maintain that the perverse effects of the drug in their rich societies can be controlled without eradicating the economic, social and moral factors that have engendered one of the West's greatest scourges.

22. The adversaries of Andean culture, who condemn the coca plant, with a glass of whisky in one hand and a cigarette in the other, clamour for its eradication and treat its producers as pariahs should give a plain answer to the following questions: If alcoholism is one of the greatest scourges in Europe and responsible for the slow extermination of the indigenous populations in America, why is the cultivation of the vine not eradicated, even though the vine incarnates one of the elements of the old world's identity? Since the tobacco habit is responsible for a huge number of victims in consumer societies, why is it impossible to prohibit the growing of tobacco? Obviously, no answers will be forthcoming.

23. However, there is one irrefutable observation that needs to be emphasized: was it not the gringo, the white man, for whom gold, plants and even cultural artefacts embody mercantile and monetary value who disembarked on Indian land and transformed the coca leaf, which contains 1 per cent of cocaine among its 14 alkaloids, into an illicit commodity. The chemical processing of the leaves of the plant, with their extremely varied therapeutic properties, into a hard paste and the preparation and consumption of cocaine in the West is part of the logic of the renowned market economy, and like any commodity, is determined by capitalism's economic laws of supply and demand.

24. In the light of economic reality, we have every right to assert that the causes of this contemporary scourge are not to be found in the Andean countries nor are they the fault of the Indians, who are usually blamed. The true causes must be sought in the huge drug markets, in the insatiable economic and financial interests run by international and multinational mafias, among those reaches of society nagged by anxiety, by the constant fear of losing the rat race and by despair. Finally, questions must be raised about the attitude and complicity of the dependent countries' ruling classes whose leaders only yesterday hypocritically viewed coca as a means of depraving the Indians and then shamelessly accepted the leftovers from the huge earnings of the unlawful traffic generated by the West.

25. The paradox is that the United States of America, which declared war on coca plantations, condoned the coup d'état carried out in the 1980s in Bolivia by the military-drug traffickers, and nowadays in the name of democracy stand surety for the policy of corrupt Governments and bestow their generosity on regimes run by veritable mafias.

26. In this context, the cocaine consuming countries have been caught up in the web of their own economic liberalism and are the victims of their own way of life, morals and licence by which everything is permitted, except the preservation of human dignity. As a result they have no answer to the question of how to eradicate from a sick social body those once accepted pernicious habits, and they are even less able to find a remedy to restore the social and moral balance of those excluded from the consumer societies.

27. Meanwhile, the indigenous populations have for centuries been suffering from the curse of their own wealth: in the past they suffered from the curse of gold and silver and nowadays they are the victims twice or even thrice over of their coca plant, international crime, the pillaging of their coca plantations, the military occupation of their territories and the violation of their national sovereignty, as well as suffering repression and affront to their dignity. For this reason, the indigenous peoples unhesitatingly condemn criminal acts that violate the peoples' physical and moral integrity.

IV. Against eradication and for legalization

28. Under the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, signed in Vienna in 1988, it is prohibited to sow, cultivate, harvest, process and market coca leaves, against which an undeclared war is being waged to achieve their complete eradication, with the exception of lawful consumption such as for chewing, medicinal use in herbal tea and poultices, etc.

29. As has already been observed, in Western eyes the most suitable solution to the unlawful traffic in cocaine paste for export to the United States of America and Europe would be the total eradication of coca plantations in the Andean countries over a period of some six years at a cost of millions of dollars.

30. This strategy, which has been developed by the Drug Enforcement Administration of the United States Department of Justice includes a vast programme to eradicate the Andean shrub by abusively and unlawfully employing herbicides such as hexazinone and tebuthiuron which have devastating effects on vegetable life. Apart from definitively eradicating the coca plantations, the arbitrary and unilateral use of defoliants and other chemicals would render vast areas of Andean land sterile and transform them into a desert. Even more significant, by its perverse effects, this coercive measure is a de facto violation of the spirit of the Rio Conference on safeguarding biodiversity.

31. In addition to the campaign to eradicate and replace millennial crops, which goes far further than we imagine, there are other plans and methods of destruction. The "scientists" of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration even recommend the use of other "natural enemies" such as insects and fungi. This pernicious plan, which is inspired by research, envisages the use of the larva of the eloria noyesi butterfly, whose voracity makes it one of the most efficient weapons to eliminate the shrub. According to research, the butterfly, which inhabits coca producing areas and apparently exclusively feeds on coca leaves, is allegedly capable of consuming over 50 leaves in its one month of existence, and of destroying even the shrubs' buds; as a result even the hardiest plants die under the onslaught of eloria.

32. The report by the Drug Enforcement Administration also recommends other "natural enemies" such as the larva of the eucleodora coca fly which apparently only attacks certain varieties of plant, the herbivorous ayromyernex ant, of whose effects little is known, and the aequidos pacificus beetle all of which constitute a serious threat to the survival of the Andean

plant. However, cocaine and the other alkaloids contained in the coca leaves offer natural defence and resistance to the unsavoury pests manipulated by "scientists" in the drug-consuming countries.

33. Whatever weapons are used to control coca growing and cultivation, with its traditional roots among the natives of the Andes, any sophisticated eradication and extirpation campaign will prove illusory and utopian in the context of the market economy and of uncontrolled economic neoliberalism - the ideology of modern societies - whose inspiration lies in the irrational instinct to produce and consume more and more. Far from putting an end to the extraction, crystallization, purification and chemical synthesis of coca - unlawful criminal acts which represent a direct threat to the health and well-being of consumers - the eradication of ancestral plants and the destruction of aboriginal customs and traditions could generate social conflicts with irreparable consequences.

34. In the light of the foregoing it is imperative to legalize the sowing, cultivation, exploitation, marketing and consumption of coca leaves to allow the rehabilitation of their medicinal qualities and the reassessment of their pharmacological properties, which should moreover be the subject of scientific research.

35. In the eyes of the indigenous populations this is undoubtedly the only way to bring the areas devoted to coca growing gradually under control, absorb the surplus illegal production, plan and organize marketing subject to special regulations, with the overall objective of balancing supply and demand for lawful consumption.

36. There is no other solution to the constant growth and expansion of the drug trade in the industrialized countries, unless Governments demonstrate the political will to industrialize surplus production to manufacture medicines, food, infusions, etc. It is now the responsibility of the Government of consumer and producer countries to accord just and equitable treatment to coca cultivation and resolutely fight the international mafias which have infiltrated every sphere of economic, political and social life.